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ABSTRACT

Drama is a means to develop imagination and empathy. Simulated experiences can affect profoundly one's judgment and understanding, adding insights and expanding the frame of reference. The name game is a good beginning exercise, especially if participants do not know one another. Each player states his or her name and a favorite object that begins with the same letter as the name. In the "mirroring" game, players try to imitate each other's movements. Players may then take turns pretending an object is some new, imaginary item, or finding new ways to use a common item. They may participate in pantomime. To explore the development of character, players may assume varying poses in costume. The players may pantomime an activity, such as packing a bag, while portraying various ages. Having "packed," players may then act out train station encounters, while creating their own dialogues. Given a newspaper photograph, players can imitate the picture and accompanying text, then discuss their feelings about the subject matter. Finally, players may discuss some social issue and identify various people the issue affects, then act out scenes involving those people. Such activities encourage critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and originality. Players' enjoyment of problem solving may then carry over to other areas of work and study. (SG)

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DRAMA, CRITICAL THINKING AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Elisa de la Roche

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.

The actor sees the world from the perspective of the character. He or she must learn to distinguish between his or her own idiosyncratic and/or cultural responses and those which his or her character might have. The actor asks "How would I feel in his situation?" and proceeds to explore various feelings. Using imagination and empathy, along with experience and knowledge, the actor builds an original character. In the process of developing a character, the actor tries to challenge his own assumptions. He needs to consider many aspects of development which affect the character, including issues of class, gender, social status, nationality, ethnicity, language, profession, family status, wealth, etc. The actor attempts to develop sensitivity in these areas in order to create a believable, multi-dimensional character.

Everyone can use drama and the techniques of the actor to construct imaginary characters and situations. Children do this naturally and unconsciously in their "free-play," and adults often create a different character's voice or expression while recounting an event. Drama, the portrayal of characters and enactment of a story through action and dialogue, is a means to develop imagination and empathy. Through drama one can create imaginary situations and environments which in turn provide a new awareness for the player. A person has the opportunity to see the world from a different and often new vantage point. Simulated experiences can profoundly affect one's judgement and understanding, adding insights and expanding the frame of reference. Since it is impossible to have a first hand experience for all the events and activities throughout the world, it is useful to combine knowledge, empathy and imagination to understand the unfamiliar.

Understanding from a global perspective requires imagination and empathy in addition to knowledge and the acquisition of information. Imagination and empathy engage a learner, like the actor, allowing him to consider a variety of conditions and possibilities. Using drama "raises the stakes" for the player, making the thoughts and events more meaningful by actively involving him in the event. Drama gives the illusion of "being there" rather than observing from a distance, and adds the dimensions of caring and importance. Listening to a news report of a tragedy from a distant land usually has less impact than hearing about the misfortune of a friend or neighbor. Drama can be used to heighten the meaning and feeling for a remote event.

Social issues can be explored through drama so that meaningful learning can take place. The players have a chance to role play different characters, especially ones with whom they might not necessarily identify, and begin to see the issue in a new light. After the drama it is important to engage in reflective dialogue so that intuitive experiences can be acknowledged and different ideas, points of views, and experiences can be shared by the entire group involved.

It is not the intention to develop acting techniques for all people, but rather to use the same process that actors use in order to explore knowledge of oneself and others, and to infuse an emotional component to heighten awareness and learning. The ultimate goals are to begin to see the world as others see it, to become flexible thinkers, to acknowledge that there are different ways of perceiving and understanding the world, and to respect the diversity and differences.

How can a person become a player using drama and achieve those goals? The first step is to feel comfortable playing. This is accomplished in a supportive atmosphere in which a person can take risks and act silly without judgement or criticism. The leader can start by playing a game, especially a name game if the participants do not know each other. The leader should engage and participate in the activities as an equal member and not as an authority.

1) A NAME GAME -- The group should stand in a large circle and one by one say his or her name and a favorite object that begins with the first letter of the name (ie: My name is Pearl and I like peaches.) When everyone has a turn (easiest to go around the circle in order) a ball is thrown to a player while saying "Pearl--peaches" or whichever name corresponds. That person throws the ball to another, saying name and favorite food or object, until everyone has a turn. Two balls can be passed at the same time to different players. (Other games can be used as warm-up exercises)

After the introductory name game the players are given exercises for concentration, imagination, and flexibility. These can include brainstorming but should have a physical component. Here are a few examples:

2) MIRRORING -- In pairs the players face each other and one tries to move exactly the same as the other, mirroring his/her partner, silently. After a while of physical exploration, the player switch and the other one mirrors. Modification of this exercise includes Player 1 moving his head and body as Player 2 moves his hand.

3) MAGIC STICK -- In a large circle a ruler is passed around (pointer or stick or any object can be used), each player taking a turn to create a new imaginary object using the stick, such as a cigar, a guitar, a golf club, an umbrella. Each player should create a different object from those that were presented.

4) PANTOMIME -- In a circle all the players try to remember where they usually wash their hands. They turn away from the circle (so as not to look at each other) and wash their hands in the imaginary sink, trying to recall all the actions they usually include. Other activities can be pantomimed, such as daily chores, and these can be performed together in a group at the same time, or individual player can take turns and show it to

each other. Some activities can be performed in groups, such as two players folding sheets.

5) CHAIRS -- This is a physical brainstorming activity. Each player is given a chair and asked to use the chair ten different ways. The group is divided in half and each half (or group) shows their ten different ways to use chairs. This way everyone gets the chance to see how others solved the chair problem, but the players do not feel intimidated by having to perform alone.

The player is given exercises which will help develop a character. There is no set way to begin this process. The following exercises are just a few of the many ways to begin to explore the development of character.

6) COSTUMED POSES -- Several scarves, strips of materials, hats, etc. are displayed and each player chooses one piece to use in any way as a piece of costume. Each player takes a turn walking into the center of the circle and striking a pose (determined by the costume chosen) and then returning to his original place in the circle.

7) PACKING -- Each player picks a space alone in the room. The players are told to imagine packing a backpack or bag at age 10. After exploring and pantomiming for a few minutes they are asked to pack a bag at age 30. They try again at age 70. The players are not allowed to talk or look at each other. They should be alone in their own rooms. The age group can be changed depending on the age of the players and how much variety you want to explore.

8) TRAIN STATION -- The players are asked to take a packed bag and wait at the train station. The first time two players are chosen to do a scene together. They should

remember the character from the other exercise. They can create dialogue at the station. The players can watch each other or work in groups at the same time.

9) NEWSPAPER PHOTOS -- The players are given photographs from newspapers depicting groups of people, preferably events which evoke emotion. The players, in groups, read the article accompanying the photo, then pose in the same relationships and facial expressions as the people in the picture. After striking the pose for a few moments, the players are encouraged to create dialogue based on their feelings and what they read. After each scene a discussion should take place so that new feelings, ideas, and responses can be shared and noted.

10) SOCIAL ISSUES -- The group of players choose an important issue that concerns them, such as homelessness. The group discusses the different people or groups of people who are affected by this issue (such as the homeless people, the politicians, the people with homes, service groups for the homeless, etc.). After deciding upon the different people involved, the group is divided into smaller groups, 3 or 4 players, and each group creates a scene based on the different characters or groups of people involved. The players should practice their scenes and present them for each other.

After the scenes are presented, the players should discuss how the issues changed after the experience of playing a character and after viewing other characters. The players reflect upon the emotional involvement as well as the intellectual understanding. In a classroom situation, it would be good to write in a journal at this point.

Critical thinking is encouraged at many different stages of the dramatic process. Problem solving is featured in most exercises, and an original response is required. The player is given a situation or challenge and must create an action or scene. The players begin to see problem solving as an enjoyable activity and this can carry over into other areas of work and study.

Players also practice decision making, especially when creating improvised dialogue. It is accomplished individually and as a group activity offering positive outcomes. Individual decisions promote taking risks and being comfortable with having an original idea, and group decisions reinforce cooperation and building consensus.

The leader of the exercises should be careful to provide an environment which encourages creativity and exploration without criticism and superimposed judgement. The leader should be involved and actively watch all scenes, but should not comment on them, avoiding labeling the work or effort as "good" or "bad." A question to the player asking him if he was deeply involved in the scene,and what new insights he discovered, will be more useful than the recognition or praise from another person. In this way the player relies on his own judgement, building skills for independent and critical thinking.

Discussions after the scenes can promote intellectual development and higher order thinking skills. The leader is instrumental in providing questions which encourage critical thinking. These include questions which develop reasoning as well as questions which help the players to examine their own thinking and feeling. The players listen to each other describe their experiences, ideas, emotions, reasons, processes, and become aware of other ways and approaches. In this way more of the unfamiliar becomes familiar, and a global perspective is more accessible.

Elisa de la Roche
July 1993

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